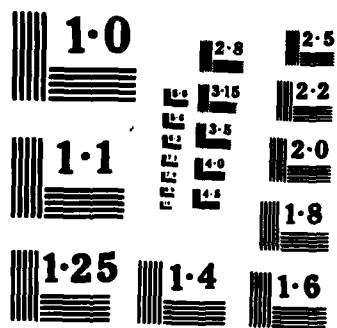


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YUGOSLAVIA'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE WEST

A. Ross Johnson

January 1984

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## YUGOSLAVIA'S SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE WEST

Remarks presented to the conference, "Jugoslawien; System und Krise,"  
Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung e.V., Wildbad Kreuth, West Germany

January 1984

A. Ross Johnson

We should distinguish Western *interest* in developments in Yugoslavia and Western *interests* (in the sense of security interests) in that country. Interest in Yugoslavia, especially in the United States, has derived in part from ethnic ties. Yugoslavia's system of "self-management" has aroused a certain interest. But fundamentally the Western interest in Yugoslavia is derived from geopolitics--from the fact that Yugoslavia has been a heretical Communist state. If Stalin had succeeded in crushing Tito in 1948, Western interest in Yugoslavia would today probably be comparable to Western interest in Bulgaria.

The security interests of the Western countries in Yugoslavia have been formulated in numerous diplomatic documents as support for the "independence, territorial integrity, and prosperity" of Yugoslavia. If we decode the diplomatic language, that means support for Yugoslavia's independence from the USSR. Carl-Gustaf Stroebe formulated this rationale in his 1976 book, *Ohne Tito: Kann Jugoslawien ueberleben?*<sup>1</sup>

In the years to come the whole of Europe will have to face the problem of Soviet hegemony. As long as Yugoslavia is independent, there is a political and military obstacle in the way of Soviet hegemony in Southern Europe. For that reason it is in the interest of Europe and all of the West for Yugoslavia to survive Tito.

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Gustaf Stroebe, *Ohne Tito: Kann Jugoslawien ueberleben?* (Graz: Verlag Styria, 1976), p. 304.

So defined, Western interests in a Yugoslavia free of Soviet control have been remarkably consistent (and non-controversial domestically in the United States and Western Europe) over the postwar period. This rationale was developed after 1948, when Tito defied Stalin and attempted to keep Yugoslavia from being incorporated in the Soviet bloc (not to remove Yugoslavia from the Soviet bloc, a crucial distinction). After 1948, the United States, Great Britain, and France extended economic, diplomatic, political, and military support to Yugoslavia, first to "keep Tito afloat" (as the policy was defined in Washington in 1950) and then to promote Yugoslavia's independent development. The Western governments felt that Yugoslavia in 1948 had only two alternatives: a) rule by the Tito-led Communist regime attempting to resist Soviet pressure, or b) rule by a more orthodox Stalinist Communist leadership that would rejoin the Soviet bloc. ("Liberation" of Yugoslavia from Soviet hegemony *and* from local Communist rule was viewed as an illusionary alternative.)

The justification for a policy of Western support for a Tito-led independent Communist Yugoslavia that developed after 1948 was primarily three-fold. First, an independent Yugoslavia meant rolling back the military power of the Soviet bloc, subtracting Tito's then-33 divisions from its military strength and, in certain circumstances, adding them to the capacity of Western Europe to resist Soviet attack. Yugoslavia was the missing link in the southeastern flank of West European defense. Second, an independent Yugoslavia also meant a political subtraction from the sphere of Soviet hegemony. Third, "national Communism" in Yugoslavia would encourage anti-Stalinist Communists elsewhere in the Communist world and thus weaken Soviet hegemony. A fourth, although not fundamental, consideration of Western policy was the hope that, while Tito could not be pressured from outside into making specific internal reforms, increased interaction with the West would encourage domestic political liberalization as well. In retrospect, I believe these policy goals were sensible, and that in the case of Yugoslavia the West pursued sound policies for good reasons.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>I have argued this in *The U.S. Stake in Yugoslavia, 1948-1968*, Santa Monica, Southern California Arms Control and Foreign Policy Seminar, June 1972.

For the above reasons, Yugoslavia's independence from Soviet hegemony remained fundamentally important for the West throughout the 1960s, although in that decade Yugoslavia's active "nonalignment" policies in the Third World and its support of Soviet positions on some international issues brought it into conflict with the United States on a variety of issues. The Western stake in an independent Yugoslavia received renewed attention after 1968, as Tito perceived the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia as constituting an increased threat to Yugoslavia. Relations with the USSR worsened (and have never regained the warmth of the mid-1960s). Yugoslavia expanded its defense capabilities, emphasizing "total national defense." Moreover, Yugoslavia "returned to Europe"; it revived a variety of political, economic, and military ties with West European countries that had been established in the 1950s but then been allowed to lapse. At the turn of the 1970s, nationally-based unrest in Croatia posed questions about Yugoslavia's stability. That crisis was overcome with a mixture of repression and concession. Subsequently, Yugoslavia further decentralized; in most respects it is more accurate today to think of Yugoslavia as a confederal rather than a federal state, led by a Communist Party that has itself become increasingly regionalized. This Party continued to repress its active opponents. While political opposition was not permitted, Yugoslavia nonetheless pursued a policy of "open borders" throughout the 1970s and was increasingly influenced by Western economic developments and culture. It became a freer society.

It is my view that in 1984, four years "after Tito," the security interests of the NATO countries--Western Europe as the United States--remain fundamentally unchanged. What remains important is Yugoslavia's independence from the USSR and, for that reason above all, its territorial integrity and economic stability. It would be illusion to think that Yugoslavia faces no Soviet threat. The USSR has never accepted Yugoslavia's independent position in Europe as something natural. It regards Yugoslavia as a deviant "socialist" state with which it has had to live but which it should reincorporate in the Soviet bloc. As the self-proclaimed model of "real, existing socialism," it



seeks major and not minor changes in Yugoslavia's international position and domestic structure. For ideological reasons, Moscow could not accept a "Finlandized Yugoslavia," i.e. a Yugoslavia that remained independent but showed greater accommodation toward Soviet security and international concerns. Extension of Soviet hegemony over Yugoslavia would give the USSR concrete military advantages in Southern Europe. It would also constitute the first significant change in the postwar status quo in Europe and as such have significant, incalculable political consequences. For the status of the three states lying between East and West in Europe--Finland, Austria, and Yugoslavia--cannot be altered without upsetting the existing security equilibrium in Europe.

To date, Yugoslavia "after Tito" has a good record of resisting Soviet threats and blandishments. A cohesive and stable Yugoslavia is likely to continue this record. A weak, internally divided, economically stagnating Yugoslavia may well be another matter. Moscow has evidently recognized this. While maintaining official ties with Yugoslavia and professing the desire for good relations, Moscow has also evidently sought to establish sources of influence of all kinds (some on national grounds, some on ideological grounds, some based on economic grievances) in the individual republics and provinces of Yugoslavia. In the last two years, Moscow has sought with some success to expand considerably its economic ties with Yugoslavia.

If Yugoslavia were to be incorporated in the Soviet bloc, the consequences would be quite serious for the reasons that have been discussed. Of even greater concern, perhaps, is the very low likelihood that Yugoslavia could be incorporated in the Soviet bloc peacefully and without international involvement. It is not "unprovoked" Soviet military invasion of Yugoslavia that is of concern, but internal strife viewed in Moscow as providing both opportunities for and threats to Soviet interests in Europe. In such circumstances, it is not difficult to imagine the employment of Soviet military forces. In contrast to crises within the Soviet bloc where Western military involvement has been ruled out in advance, a crisis in Yugoslavia that the USSR sought to take advantage of would meet with a Western response, and this could well have a military dimension. The possibilities for miscalculation and accident, as well as for a fundamental test of will

between the United States and the USSR, are great. It is surely no accident that most of the fictitious scenarios for East-West military conflict in Europe begin with a "Yugoslav crisis" of some kind.

Hence the importance of the present moment in Yugoslavia, and the need for a better understanding in the Federal Republic, Western Europe, and the United States of what is at stake. Economic performance, the future of "self-management," and the treatment of political opposition in Yugoslavia are all important factors, but all these factors should be considered in light of Western security interests in the continuation of a Yugoslavia outside the Soviet orbit.

To date, Yugoslavia has proved wrong the skeptics who claimed Yugoslavia could not outlast Tito, that the Russians would invade, that consensual decisionmaking cannot work, etc. Yugoslavia has maintained its independence from the USSR. Except in Kosovo--a serious but probably containable problem--national/ethnic tensions have remained within manageable proportions. The depersonalized multiple leadership has showed itself capable of making some hard decisions. But in the last two years, economic problems have mounted and in some areas, such as the international balance of payments, assumed major proportions. Yugoslavia's economic problems were partly "imported" from the recession in the West; in part they were the consequence of accumulated domestic policy and structural deficiencies.

It is my personal view that Yugoslavia's present economic and other problems are serious, but not hopeless. The primary cures are internal. Economic austerity is essential. It is an encouraging sign of the relative stability of the system that the regime has been able to impose this without the kind of social revolt that occurred in Poland and without the draconian repressive measures Ceausescu has employed in Romania (measures the Yugoslav regime is no longer capable of employing in any case). Internal reform is needed in many areas, within the limits of "market socialism" in a decentralized multi-national state led by a dominant Communist Party. The need for such economic and political reform is widely recognized, but the reforms themselves have been slow in coming. The coming year is the critical period, in which Yugoslavia will demonstrate whether or not the political and economic system is capable of renewed reform. It is indeed the "moment of truth." As

such, 1984 can be compared with 1949 in terms of its significance for Yugoslavia's future.

The topical policy issue of Western economic support for Yugoslavia should, I suggest, be viewed in this context. If Yugoslavia is to overcome its current economic problems, in addition to implementing internal reforms it will need substantial additional Western economic assistance (beyond the substantial aid package organized at the initiative of the Reagan Administration this past year). Such assistance is not easily extended, given Western economic problems and competing international demands. Nor can it be extended indefinitely or isolated from necessary domestic reforms. I believe, nonetheless, that given the importance to Western security interests of a Yugoslavia independent of the USSR and relatively cohesive internally, such assistance from the major Western countries is only a sensible policy. Economic relief for Yugoslavia ought to come far ahead of any economic concessions to the East European countries of the Soviet bloc, and ahead of assistance to a number of non-European countries.

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